Postscript to an Awfully Long Review

Two careful readings of Lawrence Stone's "Postscript to Eight Hundred and Forty-one Pages"[1] did not relieve me of an uneasy sense of puzzlement. Even second time around the "Postscript" still seemed to be not quite relevant to the section of my article on "The English Aristocracy, Its Crises, and the English Revolution, 1558-1660" to which it purported to address itself.[2] Somehow Stone seemed either to misunderstand or to misconstrue all my main intentions. If he did so, there are at least two possible explanations for the misconstrual.

First, quite understandably, Stone may have been just plain weary of the whole subject (the title of his reply somehow suggests this), so that he did not given his full attention to what I was saying. Or second, my indications of purpose may have been unduly opaque or ambiguous. After further careful scrutiny of both Stone's postcript and my article, I am inclined to suspect that a bit of both is involved, but a bit more of inattention on Stone's part than of opacity on mine. In any case, here is an attempt to straighten out any confusion as to what I was up to that may remain either in Stone's mind or in the minds of the readers of my article.

Stone ascribes to me the view that "the English Revolution cannot have had deep social causes because it did not have deep social consequences" and then suggests that I have "fallen for the theory of intended consequences, the notion that in history things turn out the way the actors intended them to."[3] Although I am not at all sure about how one identifies "deep social causes," and find that the phrase lacks the scientific precision which both Stone and I admire so much, I surely did not advance the view that Stone attributes to me. And certainly no man who has lived half a century and is not daft could seriously believe that "in history things turn out the way the actors intended them to," a notion daily refuted by everyman's experience, as he trips on the curbstone, gets caught out in a rainstorm, hits his thumb rather than the nail, or is caught *in flagrante delicto.*

1. Lawrence Stone, "Postscript to Eight Hundred and Forty-one Pages," *J.B.S.*, VIII (1968), 79-82 (hereafter cited as Stone, "Postscript").
2. J. H. Hexter, "The English Aristocracy, Its Crises, and the English Revolution, 1558-1660," *ibid.*, VIII (1968), 22-78 (hereafter cited as Hexter, "Aristocracy").
3. Stone, "Postscript," p. 81.

Seeking carefully for any remark of mine that may have so misled Stone as to my opinion, I encountered the sentence, "To say that the English Revolution was not *in any clearly intelligible sense* a social revolution is not to say that it was trivial."[4] This statement was a piece of carelessness on my part. Given time, I could think of a large number of senses in which the English Revolution might be called a social revolution and that each of these would be intelligible, though not perhaps very sensible or useful. The phrase ought to be amended to read, "The English Revolution was not, *in the sense previously specified,* a social revolution." The sense previously specified is that social revolutions are those

> brought about by and in the interest of particular social classes. By means and as a consequence of each such revolution, the victorious revolutionary class wholly or in part achieves its conscious (or semiconscious) social ends. Its ends always encompass the increase of its own political and economic power in the community and, as a condition of that increase, the overthrow, subjection, exploitation, and expropriation of other classes.[5]

Given that definition of social revolution, Stone and I are clearly in agreement that the English Revolution was not one. It looks, however, as if Stone thinks that I actually subscribe to this conception of the English Revolution and seek to impose it on others. Since I do not do so, do not say I do so, and rather clearly indicate that I do not do so, some of my perplexity at Stone's misunderstanding remains.

Second, Stone expressed a deep suspicion of "any monocausal theory of history" and suggests that while I share his view, I fell misguidedly and inadvertently into the monocausal heresy by hinting that Puritanism was not only "a necessary cause of the English Revolution . . . but . . . a sufficient cause."[6] In this, he unfortunately mistakes the purpose of my discussion of Puritanism and the court-country dichotomy under the early Stuarts. I do not for a moment entertain (as Stone appears to) the naive belief that historians can possibly elicit the necessary and sufficient causes for so enormous a constellation of events as the English Revolution. Nor do I believe that it is necessary for them to do so in order to stay in business. On the contrary I consider the whole notion of necessary and sufficient cause an indigestible morsel of philosophy which historians have swallowed. It has given them undue and unneces-

4. Hexter, "Aristocracy," pp. 76-77.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
6. Stone, "Postscript," p. 80.

sary discomfort, and since they cannot assimilate it, they had better regurgitate it.

I had hoped that I made clear the intention of that part of my essay which concerns Puritanism and the court-country, peerage-gentry matrix. That intention was to "bring into sharp focus the relation between court and country, peerage and gentry, on which Stone's study casts . . . light that in consequence of *his chosen structure of presentation* is intermittent and diffused."[7] The purpose of this shift of focus, then, was not to elicit necessary and sufficient causes but, far more modestly, "better to understand what happened" after 1615 when, to quote Stone, "the peerage still retained its full dignity and respect."[8] What did happen, as Stone has so well demonstrated, was a crisis of confidence in the aristocracy. In this matter it is possible not only to discover what Stone misunderstood in my essay, but to discern how he happened to misunderstand it. He thinks that the point I tried to make was historical; actually my aim was historiographic. Or more precisely, he believes I was speaking to the substance of the past when I intended to speak only to the strategy of historical discourse. I merely meant to suggest that if one arrays some of his data and a few other scraps of evidence around Puritanism and the court-country, peerage-gentry matrix, patterns present, yet blurred and latent, in his treatment emerge sharply, and that the enhanced visibility of these patterns renders more intelligible that crisis of confidence in the English peerage which is one line of access to a fuller understanding of the civil conflagration that erupted in 1642. If, as Stone so generously remarks, "thanks to Hexter's . . . article I can now see things that I did not see before,"[9] for him I did exactly what I set out to do.

Perhaps these specific misunderstandings result from a more general misunderstanding of the entire section of the article to which Stone gives his attention. It was by no means my aim to "put forward [my] own theory to explain the English Civil War and Revolution."[10] I am on the whole averse to the view that satisfactory historical explanations normally take the form of what scientists usually mean by the terms "theory" and "hypothesis," and I certainly reject the apocalyptic view that Stone, or I, or any other historian is about to provide a final explanation of the English Civil War and Revolution. This reasonably modest outlook has some

7. Hexter, "Aristocracy," p. 58. Italics added here.
8. Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965), p. 103.
9. Stone, "Postscript," p. 82.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

merits, if only in the way of spiritual comfort for our craft. If final explanations are very unlikely, all of us can at least look forward to the continuing intellectual employment of offering provisional ones, although obviously the "irrelevance" for the Now Generation of anything prior to the Vietnam War is about to reduce us all to technological unemployment.

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